

The Vintage Voice

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Ten Things I Learned from Living in a Bird Cage

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One day in September, 2004, my wife, Daryl, was sitting on the porch of our summer cottage in Maine when she heard an unusual thud that somehow didn't sound like the other trees that had been felled recently near our home in the woods. A few minutes earlier, I had gone across the road to see if I could help our neighbors who were cutting down three trees on their property. Sensing a problem, Daryl ran across the street to find me lying on the ground next to the fallen tree that had struck me.

I didn't remember anything for the next four days — the helicopter that took me to the hospital, the doctors that ministered to me in ICU, the friends and family that came to visit. There was not even a recollection of the tree breaking and falling on top of me. It is amazing how God enables our mind to overlook such periods of overwhelming trauma. The only thing I do recall, in a moment of lucidity, was the man who attached the halo and vest to my body that would keep my broken neck and vertebra in a safe, rigid position. For some unknown reason I asked him to autograph his handiwork. He did, with the inscription, "God Bless!"

Medical personnel know the device officially as a "halo." For me the word "halo" sounded a bit presumptuous, so I affectionately called the apparatus my "bird cage." Four rods extended upward from the fleece-lined hard vest and supported the metal ring (or halo) that was screwed into my head in four places. It served to maintain my neck and spine in proper alignment for 12 weeks. The discomfort in bed and the lack of balance that its weight created seemed to be, for me, the two principal problems. On the other hand, there were many more positive factors, which far outweighed the negative aspects of the device. I like to consider them as "the things that I learned from living in a birdcage." I would like to enumerate ten of them.

1. **THE POWER OF PRAYER.** While at our Diocesan Convention, many people came up to me and told me that I was on their parish prayer list. Many others have expressed in notes and cards during these past months that I have been in their thoughts and prayers. I am firmly convinced that my recovery would not have been possible without the healing power of prayer.
2. These prayers have also been tangible evidence of **THE SUPPORT OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.** Even during the long days and nights of a month and a half hospital stay, there was no loneliness. There was always present the knowledge of that great support group known as the Church which manifested itself in many ways, including prayer.
3. Closely related to the intercessory prayers my fellow Christians offered on my behalf were the **PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING**, which I especially needed to express. There is so much for which to be grateful, not the least of which is my apparently uninjured spinal cord.
4. But one cannot think of gratitude without relating it to people. **GOD PLACED SO MANY PEOPLE INTO THE STORY AND FOR THAT, HE SHOULD BE THANKED:** my wife and those whose immediate response prevented further complications as they kept me from trying to move; the neighbors, first-aiders, and helicopter personnel who made sure that

arrival at a hospital was not delayed; the skill and care of the many doctors, nurses, aides, and therapists; my concerned family and friends. Praise God for these many people!

5. Sometimes we think that we can go it alone. But a situation such as this makes it quite clear that this is not true. **WE ARE INTERDEPENDENT WITH OTHER PEOPLE.** We need to accept help gracefully from those who want to help us. May God bring us to the realization of this dependency.
6. I learned early in this experience that **A POSITIVE ATTITUDE IS IMPORTANT.** To be upbeat not only helps us to heal more quickly, it also makes it more pleasant for those around us. As healing progressed there were a few ups and downs. But the joy of that holy hope which marks the Christian life always seemed to shine through and was nurtured and encouraged by God's grace.
7. The Pennsylvania Dutch say, "We get too soon old and too late smart." For me, this seemed especially true with regard to **THE CHARACTERISTIC OF PATIENCE.** My meeting with the tree has taught me to exercise a level of patience that was not too evident in my first 76 years. Now there seemed to be so many things that I just could not control. In His own time, God, who is in command all the time, provided what was necessary for me.
8. Another truth, which came into focus for me after my accident, was **THE REALIZATION THAT NONE OF US IS INDISPENSIBLE.** During the six weeks of my hospitalization, I was scheduled, among other things, to chair my seminary class's 50th anniversary dinner, to marry a couple of very good friends, and to take a tour in Mexico. And you know what? They all came to pass successfully without me.
9. Being a hospital patient is **A VERY HUMBLING EXPERIENCE.** Daily life in a hospital bed certainly tends to lessen one's pride as one's dignity and independence get assaulted and often diminished. Hospital gowns leave a lot to be desired for the shy or fashion conscious. Despite all of the wonderful attention a hospital patient receives from so many thoughtful and kind people, the word "humility" takes on new meaning.
10. Finally, the experience taught me **TO GET MY PRIORITIES IN ORDER AND TO BE MORE AWARE OF MY OWN MORTALITY.** Perhaps we need to get ourselves right with God and our neighbor by healing our relationships. Or maybe we should be a bit less rigid in living by the clock and the calendar. Striving to "put our house in order" might be another goal. Have we put off doing a pet project that we have always wanted to complete? Perhaps it is time to reaffirm our intention to improve some aspect of our behavior that is less than Christian.

My episode with the tree has made me think about many things, some of which I should have considered a long time ago. But it has also nudged me to think ahead. While there are probably much easier ways to become aware of the ten points above, I am grateful to God for what I learned from my brief stay in the birdcage, and for the steady progress of my healing. It is with joy and hope that I look forward to the days ahead.



The author has spent his entire life as a resident in the Diocese of New Jersey where he was ordained over 50 years ago. In May 2005, he completed physical therapy for his spine, neck, shoulder, collarbone, ribs, and hand. He has resumed duties as a supply priest in the diocese, and begun work as a hospital volunteer.